

pop!

Your hand collapses into a fist mid-wave, grapples at your neck as blood seeps through. Heads turn towards you, none seeing

pop!

The first screams are rising in the wind. Your body begins to lurch, but your back brace holds you upright and in line for

pop!

The back of your perfect hair explodes forward. Decades of tension leave your body for the first and last time. You're spilling out onto the upholstery and Jackie is grasping at you, but you're falling through her fingers. there's nothing left but a broken body under a lone star.

I didn't think much of you when we first met back in 46'. Harvard boy, millionaire's son come down from Olympus to rule the peasants. Longshoremen, waitresses, truck drivers, they'd eat you alive. But I needed a job, and your daddy needed to fill up the campaign staff.

The instant I saw you in action though, I knew you were more than a pretty face with a bursting pocket. You didn't hide the Boston Brahmin accent. If anything, you seemed to like playing it up; sophistication beyond your years but with a boy's charm. You'd stand for hours outside factory gates talking to every worker who passed, or sit at a Q&A after a speech, leg draped over your chair; always comfortable but never cocky. And that smile... You enchanted everyone: dockworkers, gold star mothers, reporters and their readers. But the girls loved you most of all. Five minutes of seeing you and they'd be clawing at one another to be the first to volunteer.

Of course you won, and of course I stayed on board once you went to Washington. It didn't even occur to me to look for other work.

Eventually, your dad insisted you get married. There's only so long a politician can stay an eligible bachelor before people start to wonder if he's a *serious* person. Jackie was a perfect fit: gorgeous, from a good family, and she adored the spotlight almost as much as you. Only problem was she loved you. Even from my spot near the back of the wedding hall, I could see it in her eyes, hear it in the nervous excitement of her vows. It was clear you were warm to her, maybe more than anyone but Bobby, and certainly more than any other woman. But there was something missing in your gaze.

The others got less. I was in charge of the arrangements, and we had an understanding that if you got started before I left... Well, then I didn't *have* to leave. I got my kicks too, of course. You seemed to like asking the girls to come over to me after. Sometimes it was before, but... after was better. It gave you a

chance to rest. I'd look over at you, and see that once you knew she wasn't watching, you'd let the pain come back to the surface. I had to force myself not to stare.

Afterwards, most of the girls had this *look*. Starstruck, of course, but with a tinge of disappointment. I mean, you'd do your part—always such a gentleman. But there was something bordering disinterest in your eyes whenever it got started. As if the best part was over. One day we were sitting outside the lodge afterwards and I forced out the words that had been in my head for years:

“why do you do it, with the girls?”

You puffed at your cigar for a long while, staring out at camp david. I looked at your face and thought how there wasn't one woman in America who could resist it, but right now all I could see was how tired you were, how tired you'd always been—skin jaundiced in a shade just barely passed off as bronzed, back stiff against the seat, as if with a single moment of relaxation your spine would collapse into a heap.

Finally, you turned to me, mouth stretched in a smile that didn't quite meet bulging eyes.

“I guess I can't help it.”

The job was hard on your body, but you managed, at least until Cuba.

You stopped letting the doctors near you during the day. Couldn't let the staff worry, much less the press. Instead, they showed me and O'Donnell all your drugs, loaded up a couple suitcases, and had us hover by your side in shifts. Every few hours, we'd find a room and top you off. Antispasmodics for your colon, hydrocortisone to make up for your shriveled adrenal glands, antibiotics kept you from pissing blood. And then there was Dr. Feelgood's secret sauce: twice a day injections right into your back. He didn't tell us what was in it.

Four days in, you came storming out of a meeting with the military brass, ushered me over into the nearest empty room, and immediately collapsed on top of the nearest table. I started taking out the pills, but you waved them away.

“gimme the shot.”

I stammered that it hadn't even been six hours since the last injection.

“Shot. now,” you snarled into the table, furiously grasping at your shirt buttons. Dutifully, I took out the supplies.

“The bastards want to blow it all up. LeMay threatened to go public if I don't order an airstrike. We're all gonna die and they'll go to hell saluting the rubble.”

I'd never heard you like this: frenzied, hopeless. I drew from the unlabeled vial as fast as I could, and stuck the needle in your swollen back.

I'd become used to a sigh as I pushed down on the plunger, maybe even a shudder, but now you let out a deep, quavering gasp of relief as your body seemed to melt into the table. After I removed the syringe, you just lay there a moment, making no move to cover yourself back up. I almost dropped the vial when you spoke, in a desperately pleading tone I'd never heard before.

“I've got a knot in my back, Dave. it hurts something fierce. Is there any way you could... work on it?”
I was frozen.

“I-i’m not sure I know what you mean.”

I did. It wasn’t even such a strange thing. Some doctors had used massage for decades. But there was *something* else here. I didn’t have time to place what it was before-

“Come on. You just gotta work the muscle a bit. I gotta get back out there.”

Your tone was collected now, but that *something* was still there. I couldn’t refuse, not without talking about the *something*. I placed my hand against your back, glistening with sweat, and felt around gingerly until I found the knot. I pressed my thumb against it and began kneading. Your breath caught in your throat, and came out low and rough.

“I’m scared, Dave.”

There was nothing to say. I just kept on working the muscle. Your back began to flex into my hand as the breaths became heavy grunts. Moments later you shot your right hand back and grabbed my forearm as you let out a choked moan and shuddered into the table.

One, two, three heartbeats and it was over. You sat back up and started buttoning your shirt. I’m sure the knot was still there, but five minutes was already too long away from the world, and you’d manage. It was a couple hours after my shift ended that I realized you hadn’t looked me in the eye for the entire rest of the day.

You handled the crisis brilliantly. Your finest hour. Things went back to normal afterwards, but they also didn’t. Jackie’s looks of contempt, once easy to weather, now cut like a knife. Whenever I walked into the oval office I saw you turn the recording devices on. I doubt anyone else noticed, but I did, every time, and I’m sure you knew that. You still laughed at my jokes, but it was your public laugh, high and thin. When I brought the girls you’d always make a point to ask for some privacy, even if I’d already turned toward the door.

I’m seated one car behind you. We’re turning the corner and the crowd is ecstatic over just a glimpse of the motorcade. You turn towards them and raise your hand in recognition of the adoring mass. I can just barely see the edge of that winning smile.

We’re back to campaigning, first in Florida, then here in Dallas. This was always your favorite part of it all. Mine, too. Maybe this’ll help—Boston boys back on the grind.

Yeah, I think things are gonna be alr-

pop!